

December 8, 2005

## Marshals Shoot and Kill Passenger in Bomb Threat

By [ABBY GOODNOUGH](#)  
and [MATTHEW L. WALD](#)

MIAMI, Dec. 7 - Federal air marshals shot and killed a passenger at Miami International Airport on Wednesday after the man claimed he had a bomb in his backpack and ran from an aircraft, officials said.

The incident - the first case of an air marshal opening fire since marshals became a common presence on flights after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 - prompted dozens of heavily armed police officers to surround the plane.

Luggage from the flight was laid out on the runway, and at least two bags were exploded by a bomb squad.

But the man, Rigoberto Alpizar, an American citizen from Maitland, Fla., was found to have no bomb. One passenger on the flight told a local television station that Mr. Alpizar's wife had tried to follow her husband as he ran off the plane, saying he was mentally ill and had not taken his medication.

Law enforcement officials refused to answer questions about Mr. Alpizar's mental state or his wife.

At a news conference, James Bauer, the special agent in charge of federal air marshals in Miami, said other federal air marshals had been deployed at airports throughout the country "in a surveillance mode to see if in fact other events are unfolding back to this isolated event."

But he added, there was no sign of any problem. "There is no reason to believe right now that there is any nexus to terrorism," he said, "or indeed that any other events are associated with this one."

Mr. Bauer defended the decision to shoot Mr. Alpizar, saying the air marshals were following protocol and had been trained to shoot when they perceived a serious threat.

"All of that will be parsed out," he said, refusing to comment further.

Mr. Alpizar had arrived in Miami around noon on an American Airlines flight from Quito, Ecuador, said Rick Thomas, the federal security director at the airport.

Mr. Alpizar and his wife, Anne Buechner, had boarded American Airlines Flight 924 to Orlando around 2 p.m. and the plane was waiting to taxi when Mr. Alpizar, 44, "uttered threatening words that included a sentence to the effect that he had a bomb," Mr. Bauer said.

Two air marshals aboard the flight confronted Mr. Alpizar, who then ran from the Boeing 757 and onto the jetway connecting it to the airport concourse. The marshals followed and ordered him to the ground, said Brian Doyle, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security.

"He then appeared to be reaching into a carry-on bag, and the air marshals proceeded consistent with their training," Mr. Doyle said. "Shots were fired as the team attempted to subdue the individual."

Mr. Bauer said that members of the Miami-Dade Police Department's bomb squad detonated Mr. Alpizar's luggage on the tarmac and that it had contained no explosives. Dogs sniffed luggage that had been loaded onto the plane but found nothing.

One passenger on the flight, Mary Gardner, told a local television station that Mr. Alpizar's wife had said he was bipolar and had not taken his medication. Ms. Gardner told WTVJ-TV in Miami that Mr. Alpizar had suddenly run down the aisle from the back of the plane toward first class and that his wife had followed.

"She ran after him, and all of a sudden there were four or five shots," Ms. Gardner said. She added that the police boarded the plane afterward and told the passengers to put their hands on their heads.

Ms. Gardner also told WTVJ that just before the incident, Mr. Alpizar's wife had gotten a phone call and briefly left the plane acting "frantic."

Jamie Clifford, who was preparing to board a flight to San Francisco when the incident occurred near her departure gate, said the shooting sounded like "a bunch of soda cans falling on the floor." The flight, which had originated in Medellín, Colombia, was canceled. The concourse, one of eight at Miami International, was shut down for about half an hour.

The last of the passengers were allowed to leave the Miami airport about 11 p.m.

An F.B.I. spokeswoman, Judy Orihuelah, said, "Obviously we would have to go through all of the passengers and say, 'Did you see anything?'" Ms. Orihuelah added that anyone who responded that they had seen something was interviewed more extensively.

"None of the other 113 passengers onboard were affected or were ever in any danger," American Airlines said in a statement. "This was an isolated incident."

While there were only about 30 federal air marshals at the time of the Sept. 11 attacks, their numbers grew sharply afterward under sweeping new antiterrorism measures. One air marshal hired after Sept. 11, who asked not to be named because he said marshals are forbidden to talk to reporters, said their rules for use of force were "basically same as any other law enforcement officer."

"When something threatens passenger, crew or safety of the airplane, you take whatever steps are necessary to protect yourself," he said. "If they were telling the guy not to reach in the bag, as soon as the guy reached in the bag, that's a situation that necessitates the use of deadly force."

An analysis this year by the Treatment Advocacy Center, a nonprofit group in Virginia, found that mentally ill people were four times more likely than members of the general public to be killed by the police.

Natalia Cayon, 16, was on the plane and continued her trip to Orlando. Ms. Cayon, who was traveling from Colombia, said everybody got down on the floor after the shots were fired. She said she was crying, as were many of the other passengers.

After the shooting, Ms. Cayon said, the passengers stayed on the plane for about an hour. When they

were allowed off, they went into the terminal through a private entrance.

In Maitland, a middle-class suburb of Orlando, neighbors of Mr. Alpizar described him as quiet and friendly and said he never acted erratically. The one-story home he shared with Ms. Buechner, was white brick with a red door and shutters and a Christmas wreath.

One neighbor, Louis Gunther, said that Ms. Buechner was a social worker and that Mr. Alpizar had worked at a Home Depot in Orlando. He said the couple had gone out of town to work with a church group. Ms. Buechner works for the Council on Quality and Leadership, a national advocacy group for the disabled and mentally ill, according to the group's Web site.

Janice Tweedie, a widow who knew the couple, said Mr. Alpizar used to help her in her yard and share electricity with her during hurricanes. She called the shooting "a huge mistake," but added, "I know how very careful we have to be."

Abby Goodnough reported from Miami for this article, and Matthew L. Wald from Washington. Terry Aguayo and Andrea Zarate contributed reporting from Miami; Christine Blank from Maitland, Fla.; and Dennis Blank from Orlando, Fla.